HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THE SENSE OF THE REAL

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Abstract: In the past few decades, the fictionality of historical narratives has been fully recognized and even overly emphasized, but literature or mimesis as make-believe has always been an effort to represent what is perceived to be real, and representation of the real may not be limited to the recording of actuality. History and literature, in other words, are not just contentious, but complementary as well. The realist novel of the nineteenth century—the works of Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, and others—created a full sense of the real with literary representation no less, if not more, true to historical reality than historical writings at the time. But a sense of the real does not necessarily depend on exhaustive or fully externalized description and narration, for reading literature is always an experience of contemporaneity, an imaginative recreation of what the linguistic signs merely suggest, and in cultures where conventions of economic literary expressions prevail—such as the biblical or the Chinese—even sketchy descriptions may trigger a powerful sense of the real in the reader's mental concretization. In Chinese tradition, the works of Tang poet Du Fu (712-770) are often called a "history in verse" and praised for their faithful depiction of the historical reality of his time. In that tradition, the relationship between history and literature is never a rigid dichotomy, and there is full recognition of the literary quality of historical narration as well as the sense of historical reality in literary representations. Traditional Chinese novels are often modeled on historical narratives. At the same time, however, the distinction between the two kinds of discourses is always maintained as a sensible borderline between different domains of human activities with different purposes and different values. This distinction is something we need to revisit and attend to as a remedy to some of the excessive postmodern theorizations of history and literary representation.

In writing about the general understanding of what literature meant at the time of the great Realism novels—from the time of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson to that of Stendhal and Balzac, to Tolstoy, to George Eliot, Dickens, and Trollope, to Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Dean Howells,—"hardly anything could be more central," says Morris Dickstein, "than the text's interplay with the 'real world.' Literature, especially fiction, was unapologetically about the life we live outside of literature, the social life, the emotional life, the physical life, the specific sense of time and place."[1] Literature, in other words, creates a simulacrum of life, a vivid sense of reality, and is thought to have the serious purpose of commenting on, and interacting with, the "real world." As Matthew Arnold declared with confidence and a sense of

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[1] Morris Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 1.

pride, poetry or literature is "…the criticism of life."[2] In the last few decades, however, the connection of literature with life or reality underwent a fundamental change, for critics equipped with postmodern theories, as Dickstein puts it, "debunked the human basis of literature, as they deconstructed the human subject itself, the illusion of selfhood."[3] Not only is literature understood to be self-referential and about nothing but its own language, but reality itself is put in question and is thought to be a mental and ideological construct. History, which used to be understood as the record of what actually happened in the past, is radically re-conceptualized as a form of narrative not fundamentally different from literature, particularly narrative fiction.

Hayden White is most influential in calling our attention to the "fictions of factual representation," "the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other."[4] He interprets the enterprise of Michel Foucault as an effort to expedite "the death of things in general, and especially the death of the thing called man." As a discipline about the life of man and the change of human society, history in particular becomes Foucault's target of critique. He "regards history less as a method or a mode of thought than as a symptom of a peculiarly nineteenth-century malaise which originated in the discovery of the temporality of all things."[5] Although Foucault's archaeology of knowledge may read like a history of ideas, White assures us that "Foucault writes 'history' in order to destroy it, as a discipline, as a mode of consciousness, and as a mode of (social) existence."[6] In the deconstructive climate of postmodern discourse, fictionality is highlighted in both history and literature, while reality as objective presence exterior to discourse is discarded as an outmoded notion in much of the theoretical speculations in Western academia.

I said "Western academia" because elsewhere history and literature may have a very different relationship with reality, and it is much harder to dismiss reality as a mere construct when that reality has a direct and sometimes menacing bearing on the lives of people without their volunteering for it. The postmodern Western society, in Fredric Jameson's characterization, has discarded history and the past: "In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts."[7] That's America, but the past may have a particularly tenacious grip on people's minds in places outside the American academia. At the beginning of Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, for example, there is an unforgettable account of the bracketing of history, a desperate effacement of the past, but Kundera's text is solidly

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[2]Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in *Essays in Criticism*: *First and Second Series* (London: Dent, 1964), p. 237.
[3]Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway,* p. xi.
[4]Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 121.
[5]White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground," Ibid., p. 233.
[6]Ibid., p. 234.
[7]Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 18.

and resolutely grounded in history and reality, which give a special kind of pungency to his political satire. On a cold snowy day in February 1948, Kundera writes, the Czech communist leader Klement Gottwald was addressing the masses from the balcony of a palace in Prague. His head was uncovered, and his comrade Vladimir Clementis was standing by his side. "Bursting with solicitude," says Kundera, "Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald's head."[8] The photograph taken on the balcony that day permanently caught that precious moment and presented a perfect image of camaraderie and solidarity among the communist leadership. The Party's propaganda section printed out hundreds of thousands of copies and made that photograph widely known to all the people. "Every child knew that photograph, from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums." And yet, the political climate in Czechoslovakia, as that in the Soviet Union, was notoriously unpredictable, and in the quick change of fate that befell political figures at the time, the stability of historical record, in this case a celebrated photograph, became an embarrassment and a liability. Kundera writes matter-of-factly, perhaps with a suppressed laughter:

> Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head.[9]

Reading this, we laugh at the awkward and feeble attempt at effacing the past; we laugh at those gilded butterflies blindly fluttering in the fickle climate of their political lives, but we also sense the brutality of political purge and execution. We laugh because Kundera's sharp-edged satire exposes such absurdities of a political reality that simply cannot be effaced, and it is here in the narrative fiction, in the memory of what people knew, that the historical past persistently resides. Kundera's novel is powerful because it remembers the past and helps people to remember, its fiction is mixed with fact and supported by the past as "referent," which is highlighted by the book's ironic title, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In his novel, the propaganda section's effacement of the past is crude and barbaric, but pathetically ineffective and scornfully laughable. Thus the novel presents a totally different take on the bracketing of history and the effacing of the past, for it is history and reality that lay the ground for the fictional narrative to build on and draw its particular strength. In a way it is the ideological distortion or effacement of the past by the power to be that makes people remember and hold on to their memory more tightly than the kind of indifference to history as Jameson describes of Western postmodernism. The alteration or disappearance of photographs were very common in China during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when a large number of communist leaders, including top officials of the Party and the state, were condemned

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[8]Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 3.
[9]Ibid., pp. 3-4.

as "capitalist roaders" whose path had deviated from Chairman Mao's revolutionary line. Lin Biao, Mao's hand-picked successor, who had been seen standing by Mao's side in numerous photos and news reels, was charged with treason and died mysteriously in a plane crash in 1971. After his death— here Kundera's words fit perfectly—"The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs." History is indeed often manipulated, bracketed, and effaced, but that only makes people more sensitive to the distortion of the past, more alert to the erasure of the difference between fact and fiction. We may say in general that people tend to have a stronger sense of history and the desire to preserve historical reality where history is painful, treacherous, and mischievous—in other words, where history matters.

Even in the West, however, not everyone is cheering for the loss of difference between fact and fiction. Historians feel alarmed at some of the extravagant postmodern overstatements. Roger Chartier insists that "all historical stances must take it into account that experience is not reducible to discourse, and all need to guard against unconstrained use of the category of the 'text'—a term too often inappropriately applied to practices (ordinary or ritualized) whose tactics and procedures bear no resemblance to discursive strategies."[10] Eric Hobsbawm fully realizes that history can be used or abused by all kinds of ideologues, for "history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element, perhaps *the* essential element, in these ideologies." For Hobsbawm, however, the ideologically invented or distorted history does not invalidate the business of history as such; on the contrary, it only makes historians more determined to take up their moral responsibility, "a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular." He complains about "the current fashion for novelists to base their plots on recorded reality rather than inventing them, thus fudging the border between historical fact and fiction," and also "the rise of 'postmodernist' intellectual fashions in Western universities, particularly in departments of literature and anthropology, which imply that all 'facts' claiming objective existence are simply intellectual constructions—in short, that there is no clear difference between fact and fiction."[11] History is read as literature, and literature as representation is thought to have no relationship with reality. We can certainly choose to read history as literature, and historical narratives may indeed have a rhetorical structure like that of a novel, with a beginning, middle, and an end, which constitute the framework within which the meaning of historical narratives emerges and can be understood. Such a necessarily constructed structure, however, does not render a historical narrative completely fictional. As F. R. Ankersmit remarks, concepts like fact, truth, and reference have not much purchase for literary theory, but

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[10]Roger Chartier, "History between Narrative and Knowledge," in *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 20.

[11]Eric Hobsbawm, "Outside and Inside History," in *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 6.

"obviously this is not the case with historical writing, in which the weaknesses of literary theory as a philosophy of language may become a serious handicap, inviting historical theorists to cut through all the ties between historical narrative and what it is about."[12] Historical writing is always about something outside its narrative; it is always connected discursively with what is outside discourse, i.e., outside the language of description and narration; and its claim to truth is not self-contained within the language of historical narrative itself, but can be proved or disproved in one way or another by facts or evidences outside its language. History, in other words, is always connected with what we may call a metatextual or metahistorical reality.

But not just historians feel wary of collapsing all the differences between fact and fiction. In a recent study of literary realism, Peter Brooks, who considers himself a postmodernist, also notes that much of contemporary criticism and literary theory has discredited the very notion of representation, especially realistic representation. As a result, literary realism fell out of fashion, "the 'Balzacian novel' became a kind of whipping boy, an example of blinded and bourgeois novelizing without any sophisticated critical perspective on sign-systems and on the illusions of the bourgeois society and its concepts."[13] Such a critical stance, however, Brooks protests, only shows "a blinded view of Balzac and the realist tradition in general."[14] Long before Brooks, in a study of *Mimesis as Make-Believe* published in 1990, Kendall Walton already raised questions about the obliteration of differences between reality and fiction: "If reality is less than 'objective,' our own invention rather than something 'out there' for us to discover, how does it differ from realms of fiction, which we invent also? Could it be that 'the real world' is no more than a fancy name for just another fictional one? If so, what becomes of the difference between discourse about it and discourse concerning the worlds of Oz and *Anna Karenina*?"[15] Against critics like Stanley Fish who claim that there is no such difference and that discourse creates "reality," Walton gives a simple and straightforward answer: "reality is reality and facts are facts, however they are to be understood, and that what is the case obviously *does* differ from what is not the case, even if the difference is somehow conventional, culturally specific, depending on this or relative to that, or whatever. The insight that facts are not 'brute,' if indeed they are not, is a far cry from collapsing the distinction." Like Hobsbawm quoted earlier, Walton also argues for the moral responsibility of making distinctions between what is and what is not the case, what is right and what is wrong. He reminds us with Nelson Goodman that "Recognition of multiple alternative world-versions betokens no policy of laissez-faire. Standards distinguishing right from wrong versions become, if anything, more rather than less important."[16] Literary scholars and critics are often not willing to erase the difference

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[12]F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 21.
[13]Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 6.
[14]Ibid., p. 7.
[15]Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 99.
[16]Ibid., p. 100, quoting Nelson Goodman, *Ways of World-Making* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), p. 107.

between fact and fiction not only because that distinction is prerequisite for literature as representation, but also because literature in its own way lays claims to reality and truth in spite of, or perhaps because of, its overtly fictional representation.

Both Brooks and Walton are concerned with mimesis or representation in arts and literature, and both argue for the power of representation to give us a sense of reality. What Brooks calls the "realist vision" is exemplary of all literature in its effort to satisfy the basic human instinct or desire to master reality through play, to experience a world of one's own creation by pretending to live in such a world, "a world that can be wholly vivid and 'real,' though there can be a coexisting consciousness that it is only pretend."[17] Walton also argues that all representations are a kind of "make-believe", like a game or play, which nonetheless can produce a powerful sense of the real. "The reader of *Anna Karenina* abandons himself to the novel and is convinced, momentarily and partially at least, of Anna's existence and of the truth of what the novel says about her. Otherwise why would he be moved by her predicament?"[18] The last sentence reminds us of Hamlet's famous question: "What's Hecuba to him and he to Hecuba/ That he should weep for her?"[19] That question expresses the power of fiction, the emotional involvement we have with persons and things represented in a fictional world. Indeed, literature can sometimes give us an even stronger sense of the real than what we ordinarily feel in the banality of daily existence. The aesthetic experience, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, is an experience of "contemporaneity" (*Gleichzeitigkeit*), which makes the particular thing represented in a work of art directly present in our experience. Contemporaneity, says Gadamer, "means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be."[20] That explains the way a work of art or literature connects with our own present, and the way it can affect us psychologically, emotionally, and epistemologically.

Following Oscar Wilde, Brooks claims that Balzac invented the nineteenth century, and that many characters in nineteenth-century novels—Emma Bovary and Dorothea Brooke, old Goriot and Nana,—"have taken on an imaginative reality in their cultures" and have become "more significant than the merely real, since they sum up and represent more fully certain choices of ways of being. They offer, in the best possible sense, criticism of life: instances that lend themselves to discussion and debate, that pose important questions about our being in the world."[21] Literature can reveal to us the truth of life, truth about "our being in the world." This affirmation of literature's philosophical significance may remind us of the famous remark Aristotle made about history and poetry that "the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen. For this reason poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of

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[17]Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 2.
[18]Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, p. 6.
[19]William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.ii.559.
[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 127.
[21]Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 5.

particulars."[22] By revealing what transcends the mere actuality of particular things in the phenomenal world, literature gives us a deeper sense of reality than mere historical records. That is often the praise of realist representation, particularly the great nineteenth-century novels. Dickens, Balzac, Tolstoy, and many others are in that sense better historians of their times, and their works valuable for the insights into the nature of the industrial, bourgeois society.

Friedrich Engels, for example, famously claimed that Balzac "gives us in his *La Comédie Humaine* a most wonderfully realistic history of French 'society,' describing, chronicle fashion, almost year by year from 1816 to 1848, the ever-increasing pressure of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles."[23] He went on to declare that Balzac had created such "a complete history of French society" that from those novels he had learned more "than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period together."[24] Obviously what Engels thought he had learned from Balzac was not historical facts about the French society as such, but the nature of the French society in that historical period as revealed in literary fiction. The nineteenth century is not only the age of literary realism, however, but also the age of evolution theory and great historical writings, "the age of Jules Michelet and Thomas Carlyle, of Karl Marx and John Ruskin, of Charles Darwin and Hippolyte Taine: that is, an age where history takes on new importance, and learns to be more scientific, and where theories of history come to explain how we got to be how we are, and in particular how we evolved from earlier forms to the present."[25] In other words, the nineteenth century is the time of historical perspectives, a time in which realist novels and historical writings are not contradictory, but complementary to one another, all trying to provide knowledge of the life and social reality of the time in different ways.

The specific features of literary realism, as Brooks argues, include an obsession with "things" and an emphasis on the "visual." The realist aims to create a simulacrum of the world so palpably real that one can almost see and feel what is out there in the depicted world. Description with meticulous attention to details thus becomes essential: "The descriptive is typical—sometimes maddeningly so—of these novels," says Brooks. "And the picture of the whole only emerges—if it does—from the accumulation of things. In fact, to work through the accumulation of things, of details, of particularities, could be considered nearly definitional of the realist novel."[26] Indeed, descriptive narration has a long tradition in Western literature, the origin of which may be traced back to the elaborate descriptions in the Homeric epics. Erich Auerbach famously made Homer exemplary of the type of fully externalized narrative, which is one of the foundational modes of representation of reality in

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[22]Aristotle, *Poetics* 51b, in *Poetics* with the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, reconstruction of *Poetics* II, and the fragments of the *On Poets*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 12.
[23]Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Margaret Harkness, April, 1888" in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Literature and Art: Selections from their Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 42.
[24]Ibid., p. 43.
[25]Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 13.
[26]Ibid., p. 16.

Western literature. Homeric epics certainly serve as a model for later narrative fiction, particularly the realist novel. "The basic impulse of the Homeric style," says Auerbach, is "to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations."[27] Such fully externalized or exhaustively described narration aims to create a sense of the real that has parallel examples in other forms of representation, particularly realistic paintings that depict not only the shape and color of things and human figures, but the feel of the material substance, with details so exquisitely executed in three dimensional illusions that one may feel as if it is there for the touch, whether it is soft human flesh or different kinds of fabric, delicate flowers, hard metals or rocks, buildings, piazzas, churches, trees, rivers, or mountains in a landscape in perfect proportion and perfect perspective.

But a sense of the real does not have to depend on such fully externalized description and narration, for reading literature is always an imaginative re-creation of what the linguistic signs merely suggest, and the visual effect or illusion is formed in the reader's mind rather than actually present on a printed page. The literary text, however detailed in its description—as Roman Ingarden and the Czech Structuralists argued long ago—just provides a schematic structure with many spots of indeterminacy, which are concretized by the reader in the reading experience.[28] It is the reader's imagination that turns a printed page into a vivid and visible reality. The Homeric style with its meticulous attention to details and particularities is just one type of literary representation, and there is a different type, a clear contrast to the Homeric, as Auerbach also notes, which has minimal description and has much of the text "left for the reader to visualize," sketchy, mysterious, and "fraught with background."[29] That is of course the biblical style, the other foundational mode of representation of reality in Western literature. It is not, however, just in Western culture that we find such a powerfully suggestive way of expression, for it is also characteristic of classical Chinese literature, in which conventions of economic literary expression prevail. In literary traditions where not everything is fully externalized in detailed description, but much is left for the reader to fulfill and visualize beyond the text, even a few suggestive hints may trigger a powerful sense of the real in the reader's imagination. The biblical style and the typical expression in classical Chinese literature certainly bear evidence to the power of minimal but evocative expressions. Chinese poetry is mostly short in form and highly suggestive, and it normally does not go into detailed descriptions, but for readers educated in the

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[27]Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 6.

[28]See Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973); and Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[29]Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 9, 12.

poetic conventions of that tradition, it has the power to evoke a sense of the real just as intensely as the European realist novel.

A case in point is the great poet Du Fu (712-770) of the Tang dynasty, whose works are often called a "history in verse" and praised for their faithful depiction of contemporary reality. The idea of "history in verse" already started to circulate in Du Fu's own time or soon after his death in 770, as we read in a late Tang writer's work that "Du lived through the chaotic years of the An Lushan Rebellion and fled to dwell in Long (Gansu) and Shu (Sichuan). All these he expressed in poetry that reveals everything to the most hidden details, with nothing left unexposed, and so is known among his contemporaries as a 'history in verse'."[30] An Lushan, a general of Turkish origin stationed in an outpost of the Tang Empire, led a rebellion (*An Lushan Rebellion*') around 755 that created havoc in the land and precipitated the decline of the Tang Dynasty. Many poems Du Fu wrote gave voice to the miseries and suffering of the people at the time, but they are not at all exhaustively descriptive. His works contain some of the most exquisite poetic lines in classical Chinese with skillful use of rhyme, parallelism, and complicated metrical forms, but they may seem rather sketchy when compared with poetry in most European languages, even though they enjoy the name of "history in verse" and are said to reveal "everything to the most hidden details, with nothing left unexposed." A reader familiar with the Homeric style or the nineteenth-century realist novel may find such a characterization of Du Fu's poetry grossly exaggerated, but that only proves that our reading habits and conventions are trained or educated in a particular literary tradition. A reader familiar with classical Chinese poetry—or for that matter, biblical poetry—may indeed find Du Fu's works richly suggestive and depicting the reality of his time with vivid images and powerful emotions.

Let us take a look at one of Du Fu's more descriptive poems, "The Official of Shi Hao," which presents a sad picture of conscription during the time of the An Lushan rebellion. The speaker in the poem was a traveler, perhaps the poet himself fleeing from the war-torn regions, and he arrived in the village of Shi Hao. He stayed as a guest in the house of a poor old couple for the night, but was woken up by the local official who came to round up all male villagers as conscript soldiers. The old man of the house climbed over the wall and fled, while the old woman went to meet the official at the gate. The poet heard the abusive official yelling at the old woman, and reported what the old woman said in tears and with mournful notes:

My three sons are soldiers at Ye Cheng.
One of them just sent a letter home
To report the death of his two brothers.
We who are alive manage to live day by day,
But the dead are gone forever just like that.
No one is now left in this house,

[30]Meng Qi, *Ben shi shi* [*Poetry in Its Original Background*], in Ding Fubao (ed.), *Lidai shihua xubian* [*A Sequel to Remarks on Poetry from Various Dynasties*], 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983), 1:15.

Save my grandson, a small baby.
His mother is still here, but without
Decent clothing to move in and out.
Old as I am and with no strength,
I beg to follow you, sir, tonight
To the battlefield north of the River,
So I may yet prepare the morning meals.

The poem ends, matter-of-factly, with these two simple lines: "At daybreak I resumed my journey, / And bade farewell to the old man alone."[31] The description in this poem is kept to the minimum, but the emotional appeal is tremendous. The old woman's plea for joining the army herself saved her husband from facing the sure death as her sons did, but we wonder about her own fate, about how the old man was going to live, if at all. Though the old couple in the poem remains nameless, and no object in their house is described, not even the baby and his mother, the brutality of war and the miseries that befell the villagers at the time made a deep impression on us. It is poems like this and their accumulated effect that convey a sense of history, a sense of the decline of the Tang empire, the devastation created by ambitious and treacherous generals and warlords, the cruelty of the officials, the suffering of the poor and unprivileged, and the horrible inequality of the corrupt times when, as Du Fu famously wrote, "Within the red doors wine and meat go bad and smell, / Whereas bodies frozen to death lie on the roads outside."[32] It is poems like this that constitute a "history in verse," a history that reveals the nature of the times in poetic representation, rather than the actuality of the times in fully externalized descriptions.

"History in verse" is history in poetic formulation; it is also poetry informed and inspired by historical reality. In the Chinese tradition, history and literature never form a rigid dichotomy, and there is full recognition of the literary quality of historical writings as well as the sense of history in literary representation. One of the functions of poetry, as Confucius put it, is "to observe" (*guan*) social conditions and changes.[33] Poems are often read as signs of the times, so to speak, and as commentaries on and reflections of the social condition, but that does not mean that there is no demarcation line between historical and literary writings in the Chinese tradition, nor that Chinese poetry is all historical in nature without a trace of imaginary fictionality. Mencius (371?-289? B. C. E.), an important thinker in the Confucian tradition, made it very clear that different strategies and criteria apply in

[31]Du Fu, "The Official of Shi Hao," in Qiu, Zhao'ao (fl. 1685), *Du shi xiang zhu* [*Du Fu's Poems with Detailed Annotations*], 5 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 2:528-30.
[32]Du Fu, "Five Hundred Words in Releasing My Feelings on Route from the Capital to Fengxian County," Ibid., 1:270.
[33]Liu, Baonan (1791-1855), *Lunyu zhengyi* [*The Correct Meaning of the Analects*], xvii.9, in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Distinguished Philosophical Works*], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), vol. 1, p. 374. D. C. Lau's translation of the same term *guan* as "to show one's breeding" does not seem to me accurate. See Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 145.

reading poetry from reading history. *The Book of Documents*, supposedly a historical record, has an inflated description of a battle scene, in which the bloodshed in the war is said to be able to keep wooden clubs afloat in its steady flow like a river. "If one believed everything in the *Book of History*," says Mencius in dismissing such an obviously exaggerated description, "it would have been better for the *Book* not to have existed at all."[34] Obviously, he thought of history as reliable and credible narration, which has no place for such exaggerated descriptions. And yet, in an important passage commenting on how to read poetry, he allowed poetic license and rejected rigid literalism in understanding poetic hyperboles. The interpreter of a poem "should not allow the words to obscure the sentence, nor the sentence to obscure the intended meaning," says Mencius. "The right way is to meet the intention of the poet with sympathetic understanding." A poem in the *Book of Poetry* has these lines: "Of the remaining populace of Zhou / Not one single man survived." Mencius points out that this is an exaggeration, but the poet's intention is to emphasize how devastating a severe drought had been in the land of Zhou. "If this is taken as literal truth," he warns the literal-minded reader, "it would mean that not a single Zhou subject survived."[35] Instead of demanding the *Book of Poetry* be discarded for overstatements, Mencius calls the reader's attention to metaphors and rhetorical devices that operate beyond the literal sense of the text, and he advocates a kind of historical sympathy that restores the text in its original context and understands a poem in accordance with the author's intention and his times. The different attitudes Mencius has toward the *Book of Documents* and the *Book of Poetry* clearly indicate that the generic distinction between history and poetry is fully recognized, and that strict plausibility is required of historical narratives but poetry is exempt from such a requirement. In the Chinese cultural tradition, therefore, the distinction between the historical and literary discourses is always maintained as a sensible borderline between different domains of human activities with different purposes and values. Given the excessive postmodern theorizations of history and literary representation, the reckless disregard for the effacement of history in the Western academia, that sensible distinction is perhaps something we need to revisit in order to achieve a balanced view of history, reality, and literary representation.

[34]*Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), Book VII, Part B, 3, p. 194.
[35]Ibid., Book V. Part A, 4. p. 142.